

Sermon: "Becoming great"
22 Pentecost, Year B
Mark 10:35-45

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Parker Palmer is a wise and brilliant Quaker teacher and writer. Once when he was considering taking a position as President of a small educational institution, he sat with a group of folks to listen with them, so he could better understand whether he should accept the position. The Quakers call this a "clearness committee." It is similar to our own Episcopal tradition of having a listening group when individuals are aspiring to become deacons or priests. Someone in Parker's group asked him what he would most like about the job. He went on to list some of the things he would not like about the job, like wearing a tie. The person then reminded him that he wasn't answering the question. Again he was asked what he would like about the job? Parker paused for a moment and then said, "I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'President' under it." After an uncomfortable period of silence, one of the members of the group asked, "Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?"

I love this story because it makes me laugh out loud at his honesty and because it reflects the humanity of all of us. Of course if Parker's main reason for taking the job is getting his picture in the paper, he probably shouldn't take it! (And, in fact, he didn't.) But his answer begs the question: what is greatness? How many of us want to be seen as great in the eyes of others, maybe not blatantly, but secretly? What constitutes greatness in our own eyes? Are we great when we are famous, or powerful, when we have ascended to some sort of prestigious position, when we have made lots of money, or accumulated a ridiculous amount of possessions? Are we great because we have been awarded a certain educational degree? Are we great because we win or dominate? Are we a great church because we have the most beautiful sanctuary in the city of Staunton? ☺ Is this country great because we are wealthy or have an abundance of military or economic power?

Well, our Gospel passage from Mark today reminds us we aren't the only ones asking the question. Here we have the Zebedee brothers, James and John, essentially asking Jesus if they can have their picture in the paper with Jesus! "Teacher", they say to Jesus, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Jesus responds, OK, and what is it you want? "We want to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Little did they know that within a very short time, there would be two men, one on the right and one on the left of Jesus, hanging on crosses at the crucifixion. James and John had no idea what they were asking. (The disciples often didn't understand Jesus the first or second or third time around, which gives us hope!) They wanted glory but didn't understand that following Jesus would mean walking a path of suffering and death. They wanted to be great! But the really neat thing is that they *would* be great...after they learned what Jesus meant about greatness.

Jesus said, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." Remember our

writer Mark was speaking to an audience that was greatly oppressed by the Roman empire and tyrannical leaders were the norm. "But it is not so among you!" Jesus continued. You are to be different. "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." These last words are an interpretation of Jesus' entire ministry. Jesus' sense of the purpose of his life and death were summed up in these climactic words. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life."

While the sons of Zebedee had been scheming for personal positions of privilege at the left and right hands of Jesus in his glory, embarrassing themselves and the other disciples, no doubt, their ambition and self-absorption didn't prevent them from continuing to follow Jesus. Jesus (at least this time!) doesn't berate them for their ignorance and slow learning and instead, points them in a new direction, the life of service, the way of Jesus himself.

I want to share a story of greatness on a Civil War battlefield in the winter of 1862:

After crossing a river the Union confidently took the town of Fredericksburg with little resistance. The Confederate army had voluntarily given up the town so that they might fortify themselves along a stone wall at the base of a sloping hill. As the Union army began to approach the wall they were attacked and by the morning of December 14th over 8,000 Union soldiers had been shot in front of the stone wall. Many of those remaining on the battlefield were still alive, but suffering from their wounds, the cold and thirst.

During that night both sides were forced to listen to the cries and moans of those soldiers for hours. A Confederate soldier stationed near the wall later stated that it was 'weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear the cries of dying soldiers filling the air – lying crippled on a hillside so many miles from home – breaking the hearts of soldiers on both sides of the battlefield.'

Richard Rowland Kirkland, an infantry sergeant for the Confederacy could not rest or sleep due to the suffering of the Union soldiers and that morning asked his commanding officer if he could scale the wall and provide water for the suffering Union troops. The commanding officer was reluctant at first because of the danger to Richard but later allowed him to. As Richard climbed the wall several shots were instantly fired thinking Kirkland's motives were to wound more, but after realizing what was happening shooting ceased. Richard R. Kirkland made his way to each soldier comforting them the best he could by laying his jacket over one and providing water to the thirsty lips of all. For the next hour and a half he would scale the wall a number of times with his canteen to get more water for his enemy. It was a moment that temporarily stopped the Civil War.¹

Kirkland's story embodies greatness, the kind of greatness Jesus was talking about. This was a greatness of compassionate service to others, the kind of service that is risky and involves suffering. I have seen this kind of greatness here in this parish family often over the last week, and truly over the entire 5 plus years I have been your priest. I have seen you reach out to those in need, walk with those who are bereaved, comfort

¹ www.teamworkandleadership.com/2011/02/a-leadership-story-that-will-move-and-inspire-you.html

the afflicted, relieve the suffering, sit with the dying, show compassion to the poor. You are indeed servants of Christ. And yet, like Parker Palmer, like James and John and the rest of the disciples we have room to grow. We must keep learning how to serve, to lovingly serve our families, our spouses, our parents and our children, lovingly serve our church family, serve our community and serve our country. I happen to believe this church sanctuary is the most beautiful I have seen in Staunton and yet might our true greatness lie in how we serve others? When we live out our servanthood, a better self emerges that has been called forth by God, and when we live out our servanthood the kingdom of God unfolds into a world that is hungry for true greatness. Amen.